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MINOR IRRITATIONS

"SOMETIME, somewhere," a devoted Unitarian layman wrote to me, nearly two years ago, "will you tell ministers not to repeat sentences in their sermons, or Bible texts, or the number of the hymn to be sung. They may do it for emphasis, but that fails when it becomes a habit. To me, it is one of the minor irritations of church services." This seems to me the time and

the place to comply with so reasonable and helpful a request — not merely as a bit of sensible advice to my fellow preachers, but also as a good example of the kind of thinking which laymen seldom share with their ministers.

I imagine the reason why laymen usually hesitate to say this sort of thing directly to their ministers is contained in the last sentence. They realize that ministers have their own full share of "minor irritations", and they don't want to be put into that classification. What they forget is that minor irritations are sometimes the cause of real progress, if administered skilfully and not too often. Like the repetition of texts and hymn numbers, they fail of their proper effect only when they become a habit.

THIS MOST DESTRUCTIVE ENEMY

THIS reminds me of a passage on the subject of chafe, which I discovered in a book with the alluring title, "Fifty South to Fifty South." It is the story of a voyage west around Cape Horn, in the schooner *Wander Bird*, written by Lieutenant Warwick M. Tomkins, F.R.G.S., U.S.N.R. The words which I copied out were as follows: "Chafe must be guarded against unremittingly at sea. The damage it can do in a few brief hours is almost unbelievable. . .

Finally, on this subject of chafe, it must be remembered that there is a possibility of chafe wherever there is motion (clothes in your lockers, even, unless made fast will wear holes in one another during a voyage!) A sailor is always on the alert for this most destructive enemy of all."

Sailors are not the only ones who should be on the watch for this insidious and often unsuspected enemy, whose destructive power is felt as surely in human relations as on ships at sea. Many a life has suffered shipwreck because of the human equivalent of the chafe that wears holes in a sailor's clothes lying in a chest without having been "made fast." Petty annoyances, repeated often enough, can wipe out the results of years of devoted and conscientious service; and sometimes it seems as though the very pettiest were the most destructive. Any parish minister could testify to the terrible effectiveness of minor irritations in the break-down of happiness in family life, and I suspect it is the most important of all the causes of broken homes.

WHY CHURCHES DIE

SO is it also with churches. It isn't usually some dramatic or spectacular catastrophe that brings about the destruction of a church, but rather the persistent gnawing of some kind of

internal friction — the deadening and deadly effect of chafe, of trivial annoyances and minor irritations. You know the sort of thing I have in mind — the way the soprano falls short by a hair's breadth of the true note at some point in every anthem, the stain on the wall just over the pulpit where the rain leaked through the roof, the complete impossibility of reconciling the sexton's idea of the proper temperature for a service of worship with your own, or — the preacher's habit of repeating his text as though taking for granted that nobody listened the first time. Utterly trivial, all of them; but somehow, like the drop, drop, drop of water that ultimately wears a hole through solid rock, just such utterly trivial irritations can bring down in abject ruin a truly noble church. It ought not to be true, but it undoubtedly is. Do you know the soloist who fancies himself a *basso profundo* and makes anything he sings sound like "Rocked in the Cradle of the Deep"? Or do you by any chance know a minister who always calls it "Jerusalum"? Then you can understand why churches sometimes perish by chafe. The damage it can do is almost, but not quite, unbelievable.

But there is another aspect of the matter that ought not to be overlooked. Lieutenant Tomkins said, "It must be remembered that there is a possibility of chafe wherever there is motion"; and only an absolutely dead church, with no longer

motion of any kind, would be entirely safe from the danger. The fact that irritations occur is in itself a sign of life, as the annoyance you feel when you hear a mosquito buzzing round your head on a lovely evening in June is proof positive that you are not yet stone deaf.

MINOR AND MAJOR

IT is a minister's business to make every effort, and take every reasonable precaution, to reduce to an absolute minimum the number of causes for irritation within the life of the parish for which he is responsible — at least, as far as minor irritations are concerned. When it comes to the major irritations, you enter a different area altogether. I am not sure that the real success of a minister's work is not most truly measured by the amount of major irritation his preaching produces — irritation on the grand scale, that turns a man's life upside down, that creates deep dissatisfactions and will not let them fade away, that brings a man suddenly face to face with what he has been making out of his life and compels him to come to himself, that disturbs and overturns and, at last, redeems. That kind of upheaval within the souls of his people is what the preacher longs for, as for nothing else. It is for such an upheaval within his own soul that he prays, first of all.

"O wet red swathe of earth laid bare,
O truth, O strength, O gleaming share,
O patient eyes that watch the goal,
O ploughman of the sinner's soul,
O Jesus, drive the coulter deep
To plough my living man from sleep."

When a minister is concerned with these matters, he need not be troubled overmuch about minor things. When the preacher sounds the authentic note of redemptive religion, all the trivialities disappear.

PLEASANT AND TEPID

UNITARIANS are not very fond of the word "redemption", for reasons associated with their doctrinal history which are not difficult to understand. The word brings up a series of mental pictures and dogmatic claims which have no place in what James Freeman Clarke called "a manly, rational, and free faith." But words can be negatively harmful as well as positively, and when you drop the word "redemption" out of your religious vocabulary you run the risk of forgetting the real and lasting human need which the word has always implied. A religion that makes no place for redemption is likely to be both pleasant and tepid, but it simply won't do for the actual life which we must lead

upon this planet. Reject if you will the theological doctrines which are associated in the history of Christian thought with the word, but it isn't wise or safe to reject the human experience which crystallized into those doctrines. Christian dogma may be to a large extent outmoded and outgrown — though it is better to be a little less than dogmatic on that point — but Christian experience is not. The story of the prodigal son is true in a sense that wholly transcends the changing frames of speculative thought, and a religion that fails to come to terms with the human needs and values in that parable will prove a frail reed for anyone living in the real world of today.

A RELIGION WITH POWER

I BELIEVE that within the faith which we call Unitarian there lies all the power that is necessary to redeem an evil time. That is the foundation of my confidence in the future of our free churches. But we have made too much of the pleasant aspects of our faith, and far too little of its power. Said a well-known Unitarian once, "When the fires of hell were allowed to go out, you reduced religion to the uselessness of an extinct volcano." If that were true, I could not possibly be a Unitarian; but it most certainly is not true! Ours is a faith with heat and fire and power, sufficient for every human need. It is a

faith that is not afraid to recognize the reality of evil and suffering and sin, for it is also a faith that can redeem the souls of men into virtue and happiness and the beauty of the Lord our God.

F. M. E.

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